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**Italian Mosaicists and Terrazzo Workers in New York City.  
Estimating the Size, Characteristic and Structure of a High-Skill Building Trade**

**Abstract**

Through the analysis of the skilled trades most widespread among migrants, scholars may generally be able to better understand the experience of Italians in the US. This paper examines the case of the mosaicists and terrazzo workers both as craftsmen and artisan entrepreneurs in New York City and also focuses on the aesthetic value of the works done by workers who arrived in the US in satisfying American societies desires for architectural embellishment.

**Europeans and Italians Migrants in the US: an Overview**

Prior to the 1890s, the great majority of Europeans who reached the US were British, Irish, German, and Scandinavian. Bringing a variety of skills and aptitudes, the nationalities formed an ethnic hierarchy in the labor force. The British and Germans tended to occupy skilled jobs and, increasingly, supervisory positions in industry, while the Irish and Scandinavians were more likely to be found in the ranks of the unskilled. From the 1890s on, the traditional sources of emigration (the British Isles, Ireland, Scandinavia, and Germany) moved eastward and southward. This “new immigration” was composed predominantly of Slavs, Jews, and Italians. Increasing steadily from the 1880s onwards (in the last 25 years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the US welcomed about 800,000 Italians) the influx from Italy reached explosive proportions after 1900. In the first fifteen years of the century, over three million Italians entered the US. They constituted the largest nationality of the “new immigration” and over twenty per cent of the total immigration of this period. Over two-thirds of the arrivals were recorded by the American authorities as either farm laborers or laborers. A minority of

the immigrants, less than fifteen to twenty per cent (a considerable number of more than 300,000 people) were artisans. This minority of specialized immigrants overcame the prejudices of their employers, and sometimes even the opposition of the unions, and managed to practice their original professions as tailors, barbers, shoemakers, stonecutters, stonemasons, plasterers, mosaicists, and terrazzo workers.

Nevertheless, in 1900 about half of Italian men in the US were employed as unskilled laborers, and this percentage did not change very much before World War I. As many scholars have observed, the Italians were excluded from higher-paying and better jobs, not only because of the language barrier or lack of skills, but because of “the racial prejudice which is intense among the native population”. In fact, the stereotype of the Italian laborer was so strong that even educated and skilled immigrants were compelled to take up the pick and shovel (Vecoli 2002: 262). That was not the case with mosaicists and terrazzo workers. Because their work was so highly specialized and well-paid, they were regarded as the aristocracy of the work force.

The presence of this group within the huge building sector did not escape the notice of the most attentive of the scholars of Italian emigration in the US (Foerster 1924; Fenton 1957; Vecoli 1962, 2002). Robert F. Foerster (1924: 352) wrote that:

The outstanding importance which the Italian skilled building-trades workmen appear to have in the statistics of disembarking aliens is somewhat diminished when they are regarded after arrival in the country. The reason is only that [...] they exercise a calling in which men of the older stocks are numerous. Rarely do they abandon it or change it for another. At the least their skill is easily adapted to the circumstances of the country, and sometimes it is of a superior order, and is prized. From Venetia and Tuscany, for example, workers in mosaics and stucco have brought a special training, a traditional aptitude of which Americans have been glad to avail themselves [...] It is common to find them at work on the most exacting tasks, ensuring the neatness of appearance, or the beauty, of the most ambitious public and private structures.

This literature, however, has not been able to answer three crucial questions: (i) what was the role of Italian mosaicists and terrazzo workers in the development of the mosaic and terrazzo sector in the US; (ii) how many high-skill laborers were involved in the trade and where did they come from; (iii) what role did the mosaic and terrazzo contractors have in the history of Italian-American entrepreneurs. The first question examines the founding and the spread of the trade in the US, the second its size and characteristics, while the latter considers the distinctiveness of the mosaic and terrazzo sector in the Italian business community.

This paper discusses the common stereotype which considered Italian workers as second-class laborers and addresses these three central issues that have been previously neglected in literature.

### **“Pick and shovel” Laborers or Aristocracy of the Work Force? Italian Migrants to the US and Skilled Building Trades**

Analyzing the skilled trades most widespread among migrants is the kind of research that can allow us to understand better the experience of Italians in the US. “Skill acts, as it were, as a radioactive tracer in the blood stream of migration and [...] we would do well to develop the study of it as an instrumental technique” (Thistlethwaite 1991: 31). One of the most striking features of successive analyses of the foreign-born in the US since the beginning of the 19th century is the extent to which different ethnic groups have adhered to particular trades. The experience of Italian mosaicists and terrazzo workers in the US, and in New York in particular, is a paradigmatic example of the strong relationship between migration and a trade, between particular districts and townships and particular occupations, of how the diffusion in the US of a typically Italian aesthetic and artisan heritage is to the merit, above all, of the immigrants. Therefore, by analyzing the experience of the mosaicists and terrazzo

workers, I hope to highlight aspects of the emigration of Italians to the US which are little known or not known at all. On the one hand we find the existence of a highly skilled Italian work force without competition in the building sector, the most important Italian occupational niche within the American labor market (Gabaccia 2000: 74). A study of the different work experiences of Italians who practiced artisan crafts in the US, which has remained in the shadows of historiography, can open new horizons of research. On the other hand, there is the role played by Italians in a particular entrepreneur community. The mosaic and terrazzo sectors have been under the control of Italians since their initial diffusion in the US.

A large number of Italian entrepreneurial initiatives grew alongside the progressive appearance of *Little Italys* in the US, continually expanding and using a clientele of fellow countrymen. In most cases the entrepreneurs came from within the community and catered to this community in particular. Terrazzo and mosaic workers, on the contrary, had to deal with the tastes and the needs of the American market, and their success is therefore unique in the history of Italian emigration to the US. The decisive fact was that the mosaicists and terrazzo workers worked not simply for the Italian community, but rather for the American population as a whole.

### **Mosaic and Terrazzo: Definition and History**

The art of mosaic was originally applied as a decorative treatment to walls and, later, to floors. The technique was developed in Alexandria, Egypt when the country was under the artistic influence of the Greek empire. Mosaics have traditionally been formed by hand-setting small pieces of stone, ceramic, or glass in a decorative pattern onto a mortar base. The Romans initiated further developments, distinguishing two varieties of mosaic. *Opus musivum* was used to designate the glass mosaic for walls and *lithostrotum* was a mosaic used for floors. The latter version was divided further into three subgroups: *opus tessellatum*, *opus*

*vermiculatum*, and *opus sectile*. *Opus tessellatum* and *opus vermiculatum* involved different methods of setting small pieces of tile or broken marble, porphyry, or travertine fragments into a cement base. *Opus sectile* was comparable to marquetry, in which thin sections of cut marble were set within a larger field of marble to create decorative patterns and figures. Over time these various methods for mosaic flooring lost their unique definitions and were blended together by technique, design, and construction. After the fall of Rome, the mosaic tradition was continued in the early Christian and Byzantine churches. In the 11<sup>th</sup> century, mosaic art flourished brilliantly in Byzantium and spread well beyond the political boundaries of the Empire, particularly in Italy (Sicily, Montecassino, Florence, Venice). Floor mosaic art reached its zenith around the 12<sup>th</sup> century, even if in the first half of the following century it was unaccountably abandoned and superseded by glazed ceramic tiles, which were far less expensive and easier to set. By the 15<sup>th</sup> century the distinction between “art” and “craft” became sharper as painters no longer executed mosaics themselves but rather entrusted artisans with the task of transposing either their paintings or cartoons into mosaic. In the first few decades of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, during which Florence gained an unrivalled reputation for this artistic technique, Venice and Rome both gave a new lease on life to their local mosaic schools (Farneti 1993: 45-51). In Venice, mosaic workshops were mainly engaged in the restoration and fulfillment of work on the mosaics in St. Mark’s Cathedral. Between 1517 and early 1560 the brothers Domenico and Vincenzo Bianchini and the son of the latter, Gian Antonio, from the small village of Solimbergo in Sequals (Friuli) executed many of the mosaics in St. Mark’s Cathedral such as the *Judgment of Solomon* and the marvelous *Tree of Jesse* (Gerspach 1881: 165-180; Merkel 2000: 370). The Bianchinis were direct competitors of the brothers Francesco and Valerio Zuccati, and their aggressive rivalry was attentively described in George Sand’s novel *Les Maîtres mosaïstes*, first published in 1837 (Sand, Lavagne 1993: 5-42).

In Venice mosaic art has been practiced continuously to the present time. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century simpler, quicker, and cheaper methods of mosaic manufacture were devised in order to meet the needs of the new scale of production. The so called “indirect method” made it possible to produce mosaics on what was virtually an industrial scale. The work, which was executed in the studio, entailed setting the *tesserae* (a small piece of glass, stone or other kind of material suitable for mosaic work cut into a square, rectangular, triangular, or other regular shape) upside down on a temporary paper base. The mosaic was then shipped to its destination and installed *in situ*. This technique of prefabrication, probably used as early as the Greco-Roman age, reduced time and labor costs, and it was this technique, further developed by Giandomenico Facchina, that successfully allowed architect Charles Garnier to install mosaics in the Paris Opera House in 1866 (Lavagne 1987: 113-117). So both Garnier and Facchina (who, like the Bianchinis, was born in Sequals), deserve the merit of having introduced for the first time in France the decorative mosaic in a public building (de Stefano Andrys 2000: 574)<sup>1</sup>.

Mosaic floors or *lithostrotum* underwent a different developmental and historical processus. By the 16<sup>th</sup> century, cruder forms of mosaic flooring had developed in Venice, and terrazzo is directly descended from these forms. In Venice during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the art of terrazzo was practically the monopoly of workers from the mainland, especially from Sequals, Solimbergo, and Spilimbergo (Caniato, Dal Borgo 1990: 149). The *terazzeri*, as terrazzo workers were called, were regarded as true artists and have jealously handed the secrets of their craft down from father to son (Sammartini 2000: 20).

Twentieth-century terrazzo floors are derived from a technique known as *pavimento alla veneziana* (Venetian flooring), in which marble fragments ranging from ½ inch to 2 inches

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<sup>1</sup> An inscription in the Opera’s foyer stated that: “La mosaïque decorative a été appliqué pour la première fois en France pour l’ornementation de cette voûte et la vulgarization de cet art. Les figures peintes par de Curzon ont été exécutées par Salviati, les ornements par Facchina; l’architecture est de Charles Garnier” (Gerspach 1881: 228).

long are laid closely together on a cement base. A less expensive kind of flooring known as *seminato* was also used in Venice which consists of irregular marble chips sprinkled onto a cement base coat. Larger pieces, measuring approximately 3 to 4 inches, were sprinkled onto the base first. Medium-size chips were added to fill the gaps. Finally, the slab was rolled until the chips settled into the cement base. After the floor had set, it was ground and polished with the *galera* (a tool used in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to polish the marble chips in a terrazzo floor). Both these methods became known generically as *terrazzo*, a term applied to any floor in which pieces of stone are bonded in a cement bed (Johnson 1995: 234-237).

### **Italian Mosaic and Terrazzo Workers in New York and in the US**

The first Italian mosaicist came to US in 1880 when Giandomenico Facchina sent two of his employees, Luigi Zampolini from Spilimbergo, and Filippo Crovato from Sequals, to work on the mosaics of William H. Vanderbilt's house (1879-1881) on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue at Fifty-first Street in New York City (Ridolfi 1931: 17-18; Lavagne 1987: 116). The work had been assigned to the "Maïson Facchina Mosaïques en Marbre" of Paris by the architects Herter Brothers and Charles B. Atwood of New York. William H. Vanderbilt's residence was the largest, most elaborate commission of Christian Herters' career (Howe 1994: 53).

Like Luigi Zampolini and Filippo Crovato, who had been working in Paris prior to their arrival in New York, an increasing number of mosaicists who reached the US between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries had already been engaged as craftsman in Germany, England, and even in the Netherlands (Del Fabbro 1996; May 2000: 101-134). After arriving in New York, Zampolini and Crovato organized the "Ideal Mosaic Company" and sponsored tradesmen from Friuli to join them. In turn, the most adventurous of these newcomers started businesses of their own, first in New York and other North Eastern American and Canadian cities, then later in the West and the Caribbean. From New York contractors sent artisans to other urban

centers to affix pre-cut and set mosaics: if these employees saw a possible market, they often remained in the city to begin their own business (Zucchi 1987: 63). In this manner the first mosaicists, and then later terrazzo workers, spread out throughout the US.

At the turn of 19<sup>th</sup> century American observers became aware of “the progress this [mosaic] art has made in the United States and the wide diversity of its application in the decoration of the modern buildings of today” as stated in “The New York Times” on March 13, 1897. The article predicted a large spread of the art in the following years and mentioned some fine mosaic works in New York City:

Mosaic, it will be seen, is bound to enter more and more into the plans of architects, for beyond its possibilities for artistic decoration, its durability commends it. Good examples of the work may be seen at St. Agnes’s Church, in Ninety-second Street, west of Columbus Avenue; the Manhattan Hotel, Forty-second Street and Madison Avenue; the Fahnestock Mausoleum, Johnson Building, Broad Street, corner Exchange Place; the Warner Tomb at Woodlawn Cemetery; H. O. Havemeyer’s residence; St. Michael’s Church, Amsterdam Avenue and Ninety-ninth Street, and St. James’s Church, Madison Avenue and Seventy-third Street.

Many of these works were done by “Pellarin & Co. Roman and Venetian Marble Mosaic and Terrazzo” owned by Vincent Pellarin from Sequals. Four years later the same newspaper recognized not only the expansion of marble and mosaic art but also the fact that initially Italian and German artists were responsible for the decoration of buildings, namely churches (“The New York Times” 1901). Some of these Italian mosaicists were listed in New York City directories at the time. In 1895, for example, the directory recorded the homes of Carlo Crovatto (213 E 25<sup>th</sup> St.), Luigi De Paoli (230 E 26<sup>th</sup> St.), Victor Foscatto (344 E 60<sup>th</sup> St.), Antonio Pellarin (421 1<sup>st</sup> Av.), Vincent Pellarin (304 E 26<sup>th</sup> St.), Victor Pellarin (439 1<sup>st</sup> Av.), Luigi Pasquali (234 E 33<sup>rd</sup> St.), and Luigi Zanin (29 6<sup>th</sup> Av.). Many of them lived in the same area. In fact, up to the 1950s, the Friulian terrazzo workers and mosaicists who worked in



New York lived in East Harlem, the West Village, and, above all, the area between First and Third Avenues, bounded by 23rd St. to the south and 37th St. to the north. To a certain extent, it should not be surprising if upon their arrival to the US many of the mosaicists listed above were mistakenly registered as “musicians” in the “Manifest of Alien Passengers for the United States Immigration Officer” at Ellis Island ([www.ellisland.org](http://www.ellisland.org)). During the Roman Empire the people responsible for mosaic execution were called *musivarii* while in later centuries they became *musaicisti*.

The capacity and desire of the Italian mosaic and terrazzo workers for organization was apparent soon after their arrival in the US. In 1888, Italian mosaicists and terrazzo workers created the “Mosaic and Terrazzo Workers’ Association of New York & Vicinity,” whose membership consisted of the most expert mosaic and terrazzo workers (the so-called “Mechanichs”). Several years later, in 1890, terrazzo and mosaic assistants created the “Mosaic and Terrazzo Workers’ Helpers Association of New York and Vicinity”. The fact that mosaic and terrazzo workers had a skill which their employers could not replace helps to explain the early success of the union movement among them. Highly skilled Italian mosaic and terrazzo workers were the first Italian building trade to unionize successfully in the US (Federal Writers’ Project 1939: 161). Because their skill gave them a monopoly, they completely controlled certain branches of the mosaic and terrazzo industry in New York without support from a national union (Fenton 1957: 381-382). Despite its socialist orientation, the “Mosaic and Terrazzo Workers Association” began to exhibit some of the characteristics of conservative craft unionism. It closed its ranks to many men who wished to become members and at one time became involved in open violence with members of the “Mosaic and Terrazzo Workers’ Helpers Association” when they demanded the right to join the parent union. The union of helpers accused that of the mechanics of having “made that union an exclusively Venetian organization. If a helper learns the trade of mosaic laying and

applies for admission to that union, he is not taken in unless he happens to come from Venice” (“The New York Times” 1892). Later on, according to the registers of 1930, the “Mosaic and Terrazzo Workers’ Association of New York & Vicinity” had as many as 300 members, almost all of them Italian. Two years later, the architect Eugene Clute (1932: 140-141) wrote that “Most of the terrazzo workers in this country seem to have come originally from the Friuli province of Udine, a few hours from Venice, and terrazzo, of course, is a feature of Venetian architecture”. Besides craftsmen from Friuli (Sequals, Solimbergo, Fanna, Cavasso Nuovo, Arba, and Spilimbergo), other terrazzo workers from Veneto (Longarone) and Tuscany (Ponte Buggianese) also excelled in this work.

Most stone and concrete floors in the US were mosaic until the mid-1920s when American architects became aware of terrazzo’s design potential (Clute 1932: 137-142). Terrazzo was well suited for the smooth, curvilinear designs of the Art Deco and Modern styles, prevalent from the late 1920s to the 1940s. Terrazzo soon overtook mosaic in popularity for public buildings and apartment buildings. The trade was referred to as mosaic-terrazzo until the beginning of the 1920s, but by the 1930s terrazzo became the predominant practice. In that period the American market requested terrazzo workers more than mosaicists.

Later many terrazzo “Helpers” became “Mechanics” and the owners of small and medium size companies. As the industry began to expand, so did the need for an organization to support the growing number of installers. Called together by Gus Cassini (originally from Sequals) in February 1924, the twenty-seven terrazzo and mosaic contractors from all over the US met in Chicago and created the “National Terrazzo and Mosaic Contractors Association” (1924: 3). By 1925 at least one hundred cities and towns in the US and Canada claimed one or more Friulian mosaic, tile, and terrazzo companies. In 1926, forty of the fifty-nine companies which belonged to the association were owned by Italians (The National

Terrazzo and Mosaic Contractors Association 1926: 2); four years later in 1930, of the 128 companies which made up the association, at least 74 belonged to Italians. Luigi Ridolfi, a steamship chaplain who visited many Friulian settlements in North America during the 1930s', reported that "when one wishes to find any Friulians in a city, one must find out if there are terrazzo and mosaics companies and then approach them. Often the contractor is American but the employees are Friulians" (1931: 43).

In one of the first issues of the magazine "The Art of Mosaics and Terrazzo," published in Chicago from 1930, the architect A. Reed Wilson (1931: 26) drew attention to the dominance of Friulians in the industry when he wrote that "Although a member of the Terrazzo Association, I must admit that I am not a terrazzo man. At that, I don't see how I can be blamed if my ancestors do not hail from Cavasso Nuovo, Fanna or Sequals in Northern Italy". Among many other Friulians there were Louis Del Turco (owner of "L. Del Turco & Bros., Inc." of Harrison, N.J.), Louis DePaoli ("De Paoli Co., Inc." of New York), John Patrizio ("Patrizio Art Mosaic Co." of Pittsburgh), and Vincenzo Pellarin ("Pellarin & Co. Roman and Venetian Marble Mosaic and Terrazzo" of New York), who between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries started up entrepreneurial activities of importance, and became paradigms of self-made businessmen. The class cleavages between entrepreneurs and laborers coming from the same geographic areas, the relationship between the "Terrazzo and Mosaic Contractors Association" and related unions, and the prevailing ethnic solidarity or class relationship between contractors and workers present interesting themes that merit greater attention. For example, the migration experience of Louis Pasquali, who began as a highly skilled laborer and then later became a successful entrepreneur is representative of many others. Luigi was born in Sequals in 1861. As a youth, he went to Venice where he learned the art of mosaic. From Venice he went to Paris and it was while working there that he was commissioned to supervise a mosaic installation in New York. Upon the completion of this project he returned

to Paris but was determined to seek his fortune in New York to which he returned in 1887. He was quickly recognized as a master mosaicist and in 1889 was instrumental in organizing a group of fellow artisans which became known as “The New York Mosaic Cooperatives” and which elected him its secretary. After five years of activity in New York he moved to Philadelphia and organized the “Italian Marble Mosaic Company,” active in the city for more than fifty years.

Notwithstanding that Giuseppe Prezolini (1963: 364) recognized the success of Italian constructors and entrepreneurs<sup>2</sup>, he was probably wrong when he stated that in an artistic field where

ci si sarebbe aspettato che gli italiani avessero portato «un contributo» - they completely failed: “basterebbe riflettere che vennero qui [in the US] circa cinque milioni di persone dall’Italia, ossia la popolazione della Lombardia, e che cosa produssero in fatto di arte? Fate il paragone con quella regione tra il 1880 ed il 1940. Pur troppo la maggior parte dei monumenti che le persone di gusto distruggerebbero volentieri a New York, ed altrove, fu opera di abilissimi artigiani italiani senza ombra di genio, provenienti dalle cave di marmo di Carrara o dalle accademie di Belle Arti delle province italiane (1963: 302).

From the aesthetic point of view, the contribution of Italian mosaic and terrazzo workers to American art and architecture has not yet been properly highlighted. Although it is difficult to identify them, Italian mosaicists created numerous works of great artistic value in New York and the rest of the US. In fact, creative act and practical execution were seen as completely separate, and chronicles report that both designers (such as Louis Comfort Tiffany, Louis St. Gaudens or John La Farge) and architects (such as McKim, Mead & White) didn’t say anything about mosaicists. Conversely, registers of the “Mosaic and Terrazzo Workers’ Association of New York & Vicinity” fortunately let us know all the sites

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<sup>2</sup> In his book *I Trapiantati* Prezolini wrote: “Degli italiani che vennero in America, la maggior parte di quelli che fecero fortuna furon appaltatori e costruttori; così’ mi sembra risultare da migliaia di necrologie, che da quindici anni ho raccolto, di quegli americani di origine italiana, il cui nome era abbastanza importante, al momento della loro morte, per apparire negli annunci del *New York Times* o dell’*Herald Tribune*”.

where *terrazzeri* worked during the 1930s. Thanks to the Manuscript Division at the Library of Congress we are also aware that Peter Pellarin from Sequals worked on the walls and ceiling mosaics of the Library of Congress in Washington. And on his return to Italy, Pellarin became the first president of the “*Cooperativa Anonima Laboratorio e Scuola Mosaicisti del Friuli*” in Sequals, the forerunner of the present “*Scuola Mosaicisti del Friuli*” in Spilimbergo, which is famous all over the world (Zozzolotto 2000: 454-457). The company “Pellarin & Co. Roman and Venetian Marble and Terrazzo,” set up in New York City by Vincent (Vincenzo) Pellarin in the 1880s, worked in Temple Beth-El, the Church of the Ascension, the Savoy Hotel, the Bank for Savings, the Central Bank Building, the Museum & Library of NY University, St. Vincent’s Hospital, the Manhattan Club, First National Bank, Bloomingdale Bros., and the Savoy Hotel. The terrazzo and the floor and wall tile work of the Empire State Building was installed by the DePaoli, Del Turco & Foscato Corporation of New York (Willis 1998: 64). The company “L. Del Turco & Bros. Inc.,” set up in 1910 by Louis Del Turco from Sequals, executed works at the Metropolitan Building, the Steinway Building, the New York Trust Co., the N. Y. University Building, Radio City Hall/Rockefeller Center, Newark Airport, Lincoln Center, the United Nations complex, the Holland and Lincoln tunnels, and, more recently, Trump Towers, World Wide Plaza, Rutgers Housing, and the Princeton University Pool. The company established in 1899 by Vincent Foscato and continued by his two sons Sydney and L. Vincent installed terrazzo in the Guggenheim Museum. “The Roman Mosaic and Tile Company,” set up in 1902 by Angelo Trevisan from Sequals, installed terrazzo and tile in the Pentagon (Arlington), the Smithsonian Institute (Washington), the State Office Building (Philadelphia), and at the Ciba Geigy Laboratories (Suffern). Other much-admired works could be mentioned such as the Aztec Sun Stone mosaic in the Judy and Josh Weston Pavilion of the American Museum of Natural History, created by Victor Foscato in 1935 and the black-and-white terrazzo sidewalk

designed by Alexander Calder and executed by Foscatto Brothers Inc., of Huntington. Many of these New York sites have been designated as New York City Landmarks. In recent years, “Port Morris Tile & Marble Corp.” of N. Y., a company started in 1904 by Vincent De Lazzero from Longarone, installed terrazzo in the World Trade Center, St. Luke’s/Roosevelt Hospital Center, Columbia Presbyterian Hospital, the Museum of Jewish Heritage, and the Science, Industry and Business branch of the N. Y. Public Library. Since 1996, “Miotto Mosaics Inc.” in New York, owned by Stephen Miotto, of Friulian heritage, has installed mosaics at many New York City subway stations (e.g. 60th St. and 5th Av; 116th St. and Lenox Av; 42nd Times Square; 110th St. and Central Park West; 116th St. and Lenox Av.; 81st Street – the Museum of Natural History; 28th St. and Broadway; 54th St. MOMA Museum; and Court Square in Long Island City). They have also created mosaics in New Jersey (Newark Penn Station, the Secaucus Transfer Station) and in Glencoe, Illinois (the North Shore Congregation Israel).

More than a hundred years later, according to the registers of the “National Terrazzo and Mosaic Association”, Italian-Americans control more than half of the mosaic and terrazzo companies in New York and in the rest of the US, although the labor force is now comprised of only a minimal number of people of Italian origin. By comparing the provenance of the “old” and the “new” terrazzo and mosaic workers, we will be able to understand not only the evolution of this particular field, but also patterns of immigrants’ adjustment within the receiving society, and how immigration to New York as a whole has changed. Nowadays, as during the earlier periods of mass migration, the focus of the American immigration debate is on the plight of millions of unskilled immigrants who have entered the US illegally. Overlooked in the debate are the hundreds of thousands of skilled immigrants who annually enter the country legally. However, a recent survey showed that a pattern of skilled immigrants leading innovations and creating new jobs has become a nationwide phenomenon

(Wadhwa, Gereffi 2007: 3). The ability to perform creative jobs seems to be the key to success in American society. In a rather different context, scholars demonstrate the easier adjustment of terrazzo workers in the Netherlands: “Thus, social integration is connected again to the particular form of artisan activity” (Bovenkerk, Ruland 1992: 933). How the experience of mosaicists and terrazzo workers in New York City were different or similar to that of other Italian immigrants who performed unskilled work for example could explain the role of occupations in facilitating the adjustment of migrants into American society and their prospects for upward social mobility amongst other different groups. Many other questions have still not been answered: Do mosaic and terrazzo workers exhibit endogamous or exogamic behavior? Did the sons of mosaic and terrazzo workers perform the same job as their fathers? Which occupations were more diffused among their sons and daughters? Were the children of mosaic and terrazzo workers brought up in an American manner?

I hope to examine and investigate these aspects during my fellowship at the Italian Academy.

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